RAYMOND H. WOOLSEY

THE SECRET OF THE RAPTURE

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A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD HOPE

A MOST unusual sight. A small knot of men on the crest of a hill, their heads craned back, eyes shielded against the glare of a late spring day. To read the expression on their faces would be an exercise in contrasts—surprise, triumph, disappointment, awe.

Mysteriously, as from nowhere, two more men appear among the group on the hilltop. Two men dressed in white, and their words re-create the same emotions today that they did two thousand years ago: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11, R.S.V.).

Since that day Christians of every age and race have thrilled to the thought that "this Jesus" will come again. In addition to the message of the two angels, which was clear and specific, we have the words of Jesus Himself repeated over and over: "I will come again." "The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels." Someone has estimated that one out of every twenty-five verses of the New Testament deals with the subject

of Christ's return. Virtually every book of the New Testament makes some reference to it.

One fact that stands out among others is that Jesus' coming will be literal. Although Paul and other Bible writers spoke of Jesus dwelling in our hearts through the representation of the Holy Spirit, they also in unmistakable language declared Jesus would come in person: "Awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13, R.S.V.); "every eye shall see him" (Rev. 1:7).

In a private but intense session with His disciples on Mount Olivet just before His betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus described in some detail the manner of His return, recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He said He would return as King; appropriately, His return would be with a "great sound of a trumpet," "with great power," "all glory," and He would be accompanied by a host of angels who would gather the "elect" from the four corners of the earth.

In response to a question from His disciples, Jesus gave certain signs whereby His followers might know that the time of His return was near: there would be a period of great tribulation, phenomena among the celestial bodies, and great distress among the peoples of earth.

Christians through the centuries have been anticipating Christ's glorious return. While expecting the fruition of their hope within their lifetime, they have generally recognized that the "signs" must first be fulfilled. So they have been watching and waiting and, in harmony with Jesus' instructions, trying to read the "signs of the times."

Within the past 150 years or so, however, the idea has developed that Jesus would come suddenly, without warning, at any moment, perhaps "before you finish reading this sentence." [1] According to this view, no one would see Jesus come, and the only way the world at large would know anything had happened would be in the sudden disappearance of all Christians. This belief is known as the rapture, or snatching away.

Those who believe in the rapture do not discount the visible return of Christ in glory. They believe every word of it, but they see the rapture as preceding the visible coming by a period of at least seven years. They consider both events as constituting the Second Coming; there is only one coming, they say, but it occurs in two stages. At the rapture Jesus will come for His church, comprising all the faithful Christians since Pentecost. With the invisible Jesus will come the invisible spirits of those who have died. Their bodies will be resurrected and changed to immortal bodies, and reunite with their spirits. Those who are alive at the rapture will likewise experience a change from mortal bodies to immortal; they too will become invisible, and together with the resurrected dead will return with Christ to heaven.

Some seven years later, and probably no longer than that (according to most rapturists), Jesus will return with the visible glory described in Matthew 25 and related chapters in other Gospels. This time He will judge the world, destroy the wicked, and set up an earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as its world capital.

During that interim period, rapturists foresee

great activity on this earth. A ten-nation federation, constituting in essence a revival of the ancient Roman Empire, will appear in Europe with a highly charismatic leader at its head. This "Future Fuehrer" [2] will make a seven-year covenant with the nation of Israel and will help them rebuild the Temple. For three and one-half years he honors this covenant, during which time 144,000 Jews are converted to Christianity. Suddenly this leader, experiencing some political reverses, turns on the Jews, destroys their Temple, and demands their worship, along with that of all the rest of the world. In this act (according to the theory we are studying) he becomes the Antichrist of prophecy.

For the next three and one-half years the earth is plunged into the greatest reign of terror it has ever known. The entire seven-year period is known as the Tribulation by proponents of this theory, but the last half is the worst. Many proponents expect the entire Apocalyptic series of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven plagues to erupt in quick succession. At one point, a literal river of blood, two hundred miles long and four or five feet deep, will run through Palestine.[3] The dread battle of Armageddon will ensue in this area, climaxing in the visible return of Christ.

At this juncture, as mentioned above, God will destroy all the wicked, including the Antichrist. But a large multitude of Jews and others will have been converted to Christ since the rapture of the church; those of this number still living, those who survived the Tribulation, will constitute Christ's kingdom during the millennium. Christ will rule from Jerusalem, from the throne of David, over a

restoration of the Jewish theocracy. The subjects of that kingdom will be mortal and, although Satan himself will be bound, these mortals will still be susceptible to temptations of the flesh.[4] But as undisputed King, Christ will maintain law and order, punishing crime judiciously.

At the end of the thousand years Satan will be released; those who have served King Christ in name only will join with Satan in a final rebellion. God will throw them all into an eternally burning hell, and eternity will be ushered in.

That, in brief, is the view of end events generally held by those who teach the rapture theory. There are considerable differences of opinion on emphasis and details, but we can consider only the broad outlines here.

One of the reasons the rapture has become popular in sermon and song of late is its reference to the fortunes of the nation of Israel. No prophecy predicts the timing of the rapture itself, they maintain, but almost simultaneously with that event will be the seven-year covenant with Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple. Therefore, Israel must be a nation, and must have control of the ancient Temple site. The establishment of Israel in 1948, and especially the six-day war of 1967, when Israel wrested political control of the Temple area from Jordanian hands, seemed to fulfill the specifications.

The rapture is predicated on the doctrine of dispensations,[5] the idea that God has set up in succession various methods of dealing with man and sin: when one method doesn't work, God tries another. First (according to the theory) there was the dispensation, or age, of innocence (Eden), then of

conscience (to the Flood), of human government (Noah, Nimrod), promise (Abraham), law (Israel), grace (Christian church), and the millennium.[6]

There may be some overlapping of different dispensations with different peoples, but there is not necessarily any direct relationship or continuity between one and the next. In fact, what God sanctions under one dispensation may be the subject of divine rebuke to those in the next.[7]

According to this concept, under the dispensation of law God promised the children of Israel He would establish them as a universal kingdom under the Messiah. The prophecies of the Old Testament spell out the details of what that kingdom would be like, and of the seven-year series of traumatic events that would mark the changeover from human kings to the divine King. Christ came to fulfill the promise, but the Jews rejected Him as Messiah and King, so Christ began the church dispensation.

But, rapturists say, the church is only an interlude, a parenthesis, in the legal, Israelic, dispensation. At the rapture the church is taken off the scene, and the dispensation of law, or the age of Israel, is reinstituted for a period of seven years. Then the millennium will begin.

The doctrine of dispensations was developed by John Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren, in England, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. (There is evidence Darby was preceded in the pre-Tribulation rapture concept by one Margaret Macdonald, of Port Glasgow, Scotland, who in turn credited her views to an ecstatic vision re-
8 ceived early in 1830.[8]) The theory probably re-

ceived its greatest boost, in the United States at least, from C. I. Scofield, who in 1909 incorporated it in the *Scofield Reference Bible.* He inserted his own notes and comments within the covers of the Bible, as a running commentary on the text. As a result, many readers came to accept them as practically on a par with the Bible itself.

In more recent times *The Late Great Planet Earth,* by Hal Lindsey, and the novel *666,* by Salem Kirban, have helped to popularize the rapture. Any day now, according to these and other proponents, work may begin on rebuilding the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Other particulars of the scenario, without assigning any dates, include detailed battle plans for Armageddon that invite credibility by their very detail.

In raising questions about the rapture theory, let it be clear we do not doubt the sincerity of those who teach it. Indeed, they are to be commended for their desire to understand the Word of God. And although there may be some implications to the contrary, for the most part they stand fast on the redemptive grace of God and recognize that Jesus is the Saviour of mankind, no matter what era a man may live in. Some dispensationalists may espouse, or appear to espouse, antinomianism (that the Christian is freed from all moral law), but that is outside the scope of this book.

There are some serious ramifications of the rapture and its background that call for our consideration. A few main points stand out above others. Is the church an unrelated break into the Israel program? Is God still running favorites among the peoples of earth? What is His plan for the kingdom?

Then, of course, we must consider the return of Jesus, whether it is to occur in two parts, one of which is to be secret. We should investigate the time of trouble and its relationship to the church, and its relationship to the coming of Jesus. Where does the seven-year period come in, and who or what is the Antichrist? Is he yet future? What does the Bible really say on these points?

Perhaps the most important question of all, in a practical analysis, is Will man have a second chance at salvation? If people are not ready for membership in God's kingdom when Jesus comes again, will God give them another seven years before He really rings down the curtain? This could be more important than knowing the manner of His coming. We might not have to worry about being ready to meet Jesus if we knew we would have another chance, even in tribulation. But if our time for decision is now, we had better know it now.

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[1] Joe T. Odle, *The Coming of the King* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), pp. 53, 54.

[2] Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 103.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 166.

[4] Charles C. Ryrie, *The Bible and Tomorrow's News* (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1969), p. 182.

[5] John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), p. 19.

[6] H. A. Ironside, *The Lamp of Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1940), pp. 41-53.

[7] C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 1164.

[8] Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973), pp. 58-94.

SAME GOD, SAME KINGDOM

BECAUSE THE doctrine of the second coming of Christ plays so important a role in the New Testament, we can expect it to come under attack from all sides—and sometimes its friends can be almost as dangerous as its enemies.

A hundred years ago postmillennialism was popular. This was the idea that before Jesus returns the earth would experience a thousand years of peace and prosperity. However, two world wars and nuclear tension have fairly well discredited an assumption that mankind is becoming better. Liberalism has also made an impact upon the church. According to this philosophy, the Bible was intended only as a general guide. Miracles, as well as prophecies, are not to be taken literally; rather, one should look for the basic truth they seek to teach. The second coming of Christ should not be taken to mean a literal return in person, but Christ's coming in spirit to the born-again believer.

Dispensationalism, and with it the rapture theory, developed as a reaction to these extremes. It is based on a literal interpretation of prophecy.[1] But

in reacting to liberalism, dispensationalism has found the ditch on the other side of the road. Its extreme literalism has led it into some untenable interpretations.

The Bible was written in human language. It will, therefore, have occasional metaphors and figures of speech. Moreover, in trying to express divine thoughts it may sometimes use symbols and types to represent the real. The question, then, is How can we know when to take the Bible literally and when to look for a deeper meaning?

Some general principles of interpretation are called for. We propose the following: Understand the basic theme of the Bible as a whole and of its individual units. What is God trying to tell man? Interpret literally where possible, but recognize the usages and limitations of language—the use of idiom, hyperbole, metaphor. Understand the prophet's circumstances and recognize that usually he had a message for his own time. Types and symbols should be interpreted by Scripture. Remember that God's recognition of man's free will has a bearing on predictive prophecy. Time is a tool in God's hand—prophecies need not be in chronological order, events within a prophecy need not be portrayed chronologically, and time itself may be treated figuratively.

God promised childless, wandering Abraham that his seed would be as the stars of heaven, that he would be the father of many nations, that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed, that they would possess the land of Canaan. This was an "everlasting covenant," God said, to be perpetuated to succeeding generations (Gen. 17:1-14).

God repeated the covenant and elaborated it to the children of Israel. As a nation they would be different from the other nations, for God would be their Head. They would prosper materially and intellectually above any other people. The nations of earth would come to them to learn their secret of success. Not only Canaan but the land from Egypt to the Euphrates River would be their territory (Deut. 11:24).

When David became king, God promised his throne would last forever, and David understood this to mean the Redeemer would come through his line. Later prophets enlarged upon the role of the Messiah and His kingship. It was through Him that all the nations of the earth were to be redeemed.

According to the dispensational line of thought, when Jesus came it was this earthly rule from the throne of David in Jerusalem that Jesus offered to the Jews, in harmony with the Old Testament promises and prophecies.[2] The first twelve chapters of Matthew bear this Jewish frame of reference, it is claimed. Every parable about the "kingdom of heaven," as well as the Sermon on the Mount, is supposedly "Jewish ground." The Christian may gain some moral benefit from it, but primarily it is intended for Jews in the context of an earthly reign of Christ in Jerusalem.[3]

Eventually, rapturists say, Jesus sensed that the Jews would reject His kingly reign, so He changed emphasis—instead of the kingdom of heaven, He spoke of the kingdom of God. This ignores the fact that the two terms are used interchangeably, as in Matthew 19:23, 24; but in the terms of the theory we are studying, the first is God's rule over the

world and the second is His rule over the saints. The second is parallel in time to the Christian church; the first was postponed by the rejection of Jesus and will be reinstituted when He returns.[4]

Here is where the hyperliteralism of this system of thought becomes obvious: God promised Israel a kingdom, and He will fulfill that promise, whether they like it or not. When He says Israel He means national Israel; no one else will do. When He says throne of David, He means a literal, civil, political rule over mortal human beings who are susceptible to crimes and all the other weaknesses of the flesh, even after Christ's return in glory.[5] Such literalism is the basis of dispensationalism.

Let us apply to these concepts the principles of Bible interpretation outlined earlier. According to Malachi 3:6 God does not change; His basic plan remains ever the same—the restoration of man to the perfect state he enjoyed before he sinned. And God does not unilaterally alter His covenant (Ps. 89:34). On the other hand, God has never abrogated man's freedom of choice. This freedom is what makes man a responsible being. This means that God has to work around man when He cannot work through him. God's plan of restoration ultimately succeeds, but the how and the when are affected by man's choices. In that way and to that extent both God's promises and His threatenings are conditional upon man's responses.

In the following discussion, by taking the kingdom as a reference point we can determine God's past, present, and future relationship to Israel.

Jesus said that when He returns, "the King
14 [shall] say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye

blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). This passage makes it plain that the kingdom is neither Jewish nor Christian. It was prepared before there was a Jew, even before there was a sinner. And so all people have been candidates for citizenship, so long as they recognized God's right to rule.

When Adam sinned he chose Satan's rulership; thus two opposing forces came into play. Two kingships vie for the allegiance of man. Satan is called the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4) and the "prince of this world" (John 12:31). But Satan is a usurper and will be cast out. In the meantime, man makes his choice of kingdoms by choosing whom he will serve (Rom. 6:16).

Thus the real issue that confronts us is not some artificial distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven, but between the kingship of God and the kingship of Satan as it relates to us personally. God is interested in each person's welfare—mankind had been created as the sons and daughters of God—and He is concerned for the vindication of His name. Satan is interested in human beings only as pawns in his running battle with God.

The supreme question that faces each person, then, is this: Which kingdom shall I serve? We must choose one or the other. There is no neutral ground. Satan's is the kingdom of self, of rebellion against God. God's is the kingdom of selfless love, of loving obedience, of recognition of God as our Creator, Lord, and Saviour.

All of God's acts in history have been directed

toward the eventual establishing of His kingdom of righteousness. When, because of its great wickedness, the world had to be destroyed by a flood, God tried to save out of it those who chose to honor Him. A few generations later God called Abraham, who He saw would obey His voice and keep His commandments (Gen. 26:5). God promised Abraham He would make of him a great nation. In other words, Abraham and his descendants would constitute God's kingdom.

In harmony with this promise, God told the Israelites they were to be His people and He would be their God. Specifically, God was to be their king; His law was to be their law. It was not God's original plan that they have a human king like the nations around them (1 Sam. 8:4-7). Although the Israelites were to enjoy the special blessing of God, they were not to be exclusive. God placed them at the crossroads of the continents so that they could evangelize the other nations (Deut. 4:5-8). The heathen would learn of the true God through them and thus join His kingdom (Jer. 3:17).

When the Israelites insisted on having a man reign over them, God went along with their demand but He insisted that He remain their Supreme Ruler. His authority was to be the power behind their earthly throne. When David became king and God promised the world's Redeemer through his line, God was reasserting His kingship. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, would appear on earth as the Son of David and therefore would have a double right to kingship. He would be assuming the rulership of the kingdom "prepared from the foundation of the world." From a world view, things had never

changed—what had begun as God's kingdom was still God's kingdom.

This is a vital point because it demonstrates the continuity of God's plan and of His right to rule: God had the same objectives during the Roman Era as He had during David's reign and Abraham's wanderings and Adam's exile. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed on earth was the same as that envisioned by God at the creation of the world. That kingdom was a present one in that it could be entered at once by faith, by accepting Jesus as the king of the heart (Luke 17:21). It was a future kingdom in that Satan would eventually be destroyed and all things would once again be under God's uncontested control (Phil. 3:21; 1 Cor. 15:28).

Yet in His right to rule, God allowed Himself room to maneuver in response to man's freedom to choose. The God of the universe is not bound by man's intransigence. All of God's promises are contingent upon man's voluntary cooperation. God selected Abraham as His partner in a covenant relationship, specifically because he obeyed God (Gen. 26:5).

When promising the new nation of Israel untold prosperity (Deuteronomy 7), God accompanied the promise with the warning "If you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God" (chap. 8:19, 20, R.S.V.).

The same conditions were repeated just before Moses made his final departure: "If you obey the

voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth" (chap. 28:1, R.S.V.). "But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you" (verse 15, R.S.V.).

Notice how complete and final would be God's rejection of Israel: "Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured" (chap. 31:17, R.S.V.).

The promise of territory was as conditional as was that of their status. The area promised would be given them only as they cleared it of heathen nations and could properly use it (chap. 7:22), but if the Israelites failed in following through, God would deal with them as He intended to deal with the heathen (Num. 33:56).

This conditionality was restressed to Solomon at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chron. 7:17-22), by Isaiah (Isa. 1:19, 20), and by Jeremiah (Jer. 12:16, 17). In fact, Jeremiah spelled out in unmistakable terms that conditionality was always a factor in God's promises and threatenings, even when not explicitly stated: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom [and the context shows God is including Israel], that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do
18 to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a na-

tion or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it" (Jer. 18:7-10, R.S.V.).

Many instances are recorded in Scripture of how God did just this. Of the multitude of Israelites in Egypt who were promised return to Canaan, only two reached there. The rest rebelled and died in the wilderness (Num. 14:29-34). After telling King Hezekiah he would shortly die, God added fifteen years to his life (2 Kings 20). God told Jonah to preach to Nineveh that it would soon be destroyed, but God did not destroy Nineveh then, because her people repented (Jonah 3).

In her vacillation between Jehovah worship and idolatry, Israel experienced the gamut of God's blessings and curses. Under some of the judges and under David and Solomon, Israel prospered. But when she apostatized and went after other gods, famine, pestilence, and military reverses devastated her. Finally, after an unbroken succession of evil kings and idolatry, the ten northern tribes were carried by the Assyrians into captivity, never to know national identity again (2 Kings 17:18-23).

God spared a remnant of eight people from the antediluvian world of wickedness. He called Abram out of a preponderance of heathenism. And in the disaster that befell Israel, God again spared a remnant in the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. (Because of the throne and numerical superiority, the political name of God's true people simply became Judah and the people became known as Jews.) This fragment thereby became the real Israel, the only remnant of Israel.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others foresaw Israel's exile to Babylon, but they promised that God would return them once again to their own land. Said Isaiah, "In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time [the first time was the deliverance from Egypt]" (Isa. 11:11, R.S.V.), and Jeremiah promised, "For, lo, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will bring again the captivity of my people" (Jer. 30:3). These promises were fulfilled when the Jews returned from their Babylonian captivity, as Ezra verifies in Ezra 1:1-3. Israel was being called once more to a glorious relationship with God.

But this was to be their last chance. If they were faithful God would make them a blessing and all they did would prosper. But if they rejected God's Lordship, God would reject them. Just as God allotted them a certain time in captivity (Jer. 29:10), so He allotted them a certain time in the restoration (Dan. 9:24-27), to allow them to demonstrate what they would do.

"When the time had fully come" Jesus presented Himself to the Jewish nation as the fulfillment of the promise. In Him was the kingdom (Matt. 27:11). The Jews were invited into a personal relationship with Him as the giver of the Abrahamic covenant, a relationship that would acknowledge their allegiance to God as their sovereign. But as so many times before, they turned their backs on such a relationship. They wanted an earthly kingdom, and to achieve this end they even tried to force Jesus to become their king (John 6:14, 15). Jesus need not have postponed an earthly reign from the throne of David in Jerusalem. That was

the kind the Jews wanted, and if that had been the kind of kingdom Jesus had in mind He could have done it then. But that was not His kind of kingdom.

In rejecting the reign of Jesus in their hearts, the Jews irrevocably defaulted on their last chance to fulfill God's plan for them as a chosen nation. In the parable of the marriage supper Jesus spelled out the consequences. A king gave a marriage feast for his son, with special invitations to his guests. But they made light of the invitation and killed the king's messengers. The king destroyed those people and redirected the invitation to others.

Isaiah had used the figure of Israel as a vineyard. After God pruned it, protected it, and nourished it, it brought forth only wild grapes. Jesus picked up this vineyard-husbandman relationship in His parable of the vineyard and the wicked husbandmen, which He told to the chief priests and elders of the Jews (Matthew 21).

According to this parable a man planted a vineyard and left it in the hands of caretakers. At harvesttime the owner sent servants to receive the fruit. The caretakers stoned and killed them. This happened several times, and finally the owner sent his own son, thinking the caretakers surely would respect the heir. But they killed him, too.

"What will the owner do when he comes home?" Jesus asked His audience.

"He will destroy the murderers and let out his vineyard to more honorable caretakers," His listeners responded.

Jesus replied pointedly: "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (verse 43). This so an-

gered the Jewish leaders they wanted to kill Him on the spot. A few days later Jesus pronounced, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (chap. 23:38), and the Jewish leaders shortly confirmed the sentence by their declaration, "We have no king but Caesar."

In His upper-room discourse with His disciples Jesus once again used the vine as a figure to get across His message. "I am the vine, ye are the branches. . . . If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:5, 6). The Jewish nation was being cast off; only the disciples who brought forth the fruits of faith and obedience would be retained. They were the true Israel.

God was not altering His covenant. As He had done in the past He was restricting its prerogatives to those who abide by its spirit. The disciples formed the link of continuity. They were the remnant God had said He would preserve (Eze. 14:22). They were His "little flock," the nucleus around which He would build His church. This true Israel would no longer have a political coloration, but would form the "body" of Christ on earth.

The church would not be limited to heirs according to the flesh. Through the recognition of Jesus Christ as king, all peoples could join the new fellowship of faith. This was a matter that required a little time for the disciples to understand. It took a special vision, given three times, to convince Peter that the Gentiles also were candidates for the kingdom. After he went to Cornelius' home, and after he heard how God had appeared to the cen-

turion, Peter declared, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34, 35). And when Peter told this experience to the church in Jerusalem, they agreed with Peter: "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (chap. 11:18).

Although there were occasional lapses on the part of the Jewish brethren, more and more the Christian church understood this truth of unity. Paul declared, "The Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph. 3:6, R.S.V.). "There is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:12, 13).

It was to this body of Christ, composed of Jew and Gentile, all Christians, that Peter reaffirmed the promises made to Israel. Jesus had said the kingdom of God would be taken from the Jewish nation and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits of the kingdom. He could not have been speaking of a restored national Israel, as dispensationalism holds, for no promise was made of such a restoration. God's rejection of them as a chosen people was final. But in his first Epistle to the church at large Peter renews the ancient promise: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9, 10; cf. Ex. 19:6, 7).

The church, then, constitutes the new, or true,

Israel. Some may call this "spiritual Israel," but that is a loaded term for those who quite properly seek to avoid any doctrine that would "spiritualize" away literal and vital Bible truths. True Israel, the church, *is* literal Israel. In God's sight, it is more literal than is the Israel of the flesh. "For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:28, 29, R.S.V.).

The church meets the terms of the Abrahamic covenant—it is Abraham's offspring: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:28, 29, R.S.V.). (The Jews did not see themselves as children of Israel first and of Abraham second. When they wanted to establish their ancestry it was to Abraham they referred, as in John 8:39.)

The church is the Israel of God: "Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16, R.S.V.). The church is the commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:12, 13). It is in this sense that "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11:25, 26).

It is important to bear in mind that the church is not a supplanter of Israel, even by divine fiat. It *is* Israel. This continuity was recognized in the twelve apostles, whom Jesus said would judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). It was recognized in

Paul's figure of an olive tree that had some branches lopped off and others grafted in. It was particularly recognized in the figure of God's bride. The Jewish people were God's bride in Hosea; the church is God's bride in Ephesians. God does not have two brides. Israel and the church do not remain two separate and distinct entities throughout eternity, as dispensationalism maintains.[6] There is only one bride. God's faithful ones are Israel in both the Old and the New Testament.

At this juncture we would do well to remind ourselves of the principles of interpretation of Scripture, and particularly of prophecy. Whereas the scriptural situation of Israel has altered from that of an ethnic nation to that of a worldwide church, certain details of prophecy will of necessity be no longer applicable. The purposes of God remain inviolate, but some of the procedures toward achieving those purposes will be given different emphases. We can accept, then, the main thrust of the Old Testament prophecies as applying to the church, but in specific details of application we must be guided by divinely inspired writers.

Peter, for instance, applied the prophecy of Joel, that God would pour out His Spirit in prophetic manifestations upon common people, to the Pentecost experience (Acts 2:17-21). James applied Amos' prediction of a restored tabernacle of David (Amos 9:11, 12) to the gospel's success among the Gentiles (Acts 15:16, 17). The author of Hebrews made a new application of Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant (Heb. 8:8-12). And the Revelation of John gives valuable insight into many of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel.

On the other hand, and by the same token, some of the Old Testament prophecies would no longer apply. Zechariah, when prophesying of the enthronement of the Lord of hosts as king, said that the Feast of Tabernacles would be observed in Jerusalem, and mentioned animal sacrifices (Zech. 14:16-21). But Jesus told the Sychar woman that the time was coming when Jerusalem would not be a center of worship (John 4:21). Just before His crucifixion He announced the Temple as abandoned by God (Matt. 23:38). This fact was dramatically demonstrated at the moment of Christ's death when the great inner veil was ripped by unseen hands from top to bottom (chap. 27:50, 51).

Moreover, the writer of the book of Hebrews affirms that the system of sacrifices and temple worship has been superseded by Christ's work as our high priest in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 10:4-14). There is, therefore, no more call for an earthly temple in the plan of salvation.

We note with interest that in the reapplication of Old Testament prophecies, none of the glory or greatness of the original is lost. Israel is enlarged beyond ethnic boundaries to encompass all peoples. Instead of territorial limits from Egypt to the Euphrates, the entire world is her scope and inheritance. Instead of a scarred old city wracked by centuries of conflict, true Israel looks for a new city, built by God (chap. 11:15, 16).

We have studied at some length the relationship of Israel, the church, and the kingdom. Let us synthesize it briefly and draw a conclusion.

God has called people to recognize the rulership of Jesus Christ. The Israelites were chosen to pre-

pare for the kingdom and to enter into its benefits. These were to consist primarily of a special relationship with God, and secondarily of material blessings. But, placing their emphasis on the wrong aspect, the children of Israel spurned their opportunity. God began the church as the rightful heir to the original promises, children of the spirit in which the original covenant was made.

The Old Testament prophecies are, in the New Testament, refocused to the church. There is no further place for Israel as a nation in the kingdom of God, although individual Jews have the same access to salvation as anyone else.

Therefore, we can conclude that whether national Israel rebuilds the Temple or whatever she does, is immaterial to the Bible picture of last-day events. It is the church that will welcome Christ upon His return in glory. The true Israel of all ages will be united in Christ—"One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:5, 6).

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[1] John F. Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), pp. 125, 126.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.
[3] Scofield, *op. cit.*, pp. 1000-1003.
[4] Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy,* p. 25.
[5] Ryrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 182, 183.
[6] Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy,* p. 163.

WHENCE THE RAPTURE?

WORDS ARE, in themselves, harmless—it is the ideas they generate that sometimes can be dangerous. That is the way with the word *rapture.* The word is all right, and is even Biblical. It comes from the Latin *rapio,* "to carry off." The secular connotation is of a state of deep emotion, or ecstasy, but we are interested here in the sense of being carried away bodily.

The Vulgate uses a form of this verb when translating 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where Paul tells of how the righteous who are alive at the coming of Christ will be "caught up" with those resurrected from the dead, to meet the Lord. Another word for the same experience is *translation.*

The question is whether the righteous, both the resurrected dead and the living, are caught up to meet Christ at His public appearance in power and glory, or whether it secretly precedes that event by several years. The latter view is a feature of the position we have been studying. That position holds that the church period is a distinct entity that breaks into the program for national Israel: at any

moment, silently and without warning, Christ will come and rapture, or remove, His church from the earth, and the world will revert to its pre-New Testament standing before God for another seven years.

We have studied that the church is a continuation of the true Israel and is not an interim scheme. In this chapter we should look at some of the specific texts that deal with the Second Coming and the events that are connected with it.

Jesus had referred to the destruction of the Temple, and the disciples asked for signs of that event and of His return. In Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 Jesus gives His reply. He did not clearly indicate which of His remarks applied solely to the former event, and as proponents of the rapture theory disagree among themselves on this score, we will concentrate on other areas.

Jesus spoke of tribulation and of phenomena among celestial bodies. Then He said, "All the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates" (Matt. 24:30-33, R.S.V.).

This message is to the church. Jesus is talking to His disciples, and through them to the church as a whole. He expected the church to be on earth when He returns. "When *you* see all these things," He

said. This message is not for the Jewish nation as such. He had already told the Jewish leaders the kingdom of God was taken from them and that their house was left desolate unto them (Matt. 21:43; 23:47).

Notice the features of Jesus' return as He described them: (1) The tribes of earth will mourn, indicating they recognize an element of judgment in His appearing (Jesus dwells on this aspect in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew); (2) Jesus comes in great glory; (3) angels accompany Him; (4) the angels are commanded with a great trumpet sound by God; (5) the elect of God are gathered from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. This indicates the resurrection of the righteous dead, as well as the gathering of the righteous living, for all God's elect, or chosen ones, since Adam have been awaiting that day (Job 19:25, 26).

But we turn to Paul for more specific details of the resurrection. He describes it in his letters to the churches at Corinth and Thessalonica. Not every feature is present in every account, but sufficient for us to know they are speaking of the same event. The crucifixion of Christ, for example, is not described precisely the same in the Gospels. Only Matthew tells of Judas' fiasco, and of Pilate sending guards to the tomb, only Luke tells of the penitent thief, and only Mark and John describe Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene. Different features were of interest to different writers, and they wrote to emphasize different aspects.

Paul says, "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For

this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:14-17, R.S.V.).

Paul's main emphasis here is that the righteous dead will not be forgotten. Even as God brought Jesus from the dead, so will He raise the righteous. He will bring them "with him," that is, from the grave (Rom. 6:4).

This passage compares with Matthew 24 in several important aspects: (1) the descent of Christ from heaven; (2) the cry of command; (3) angels; (4) the trumpet call of God; (5) the resurrection. An additional feature that is not included in Christ's Olivet discourse is the translation of the righteous living and the catching up of both the living and the resurrected dead to meet the Lord in the air.

Since this is the same coming Jesus described, all the signs He foretold apply to this event—the time of trouble, the celestial phenomena, the earthquakes, wars, and other disasters. While the elected or chosen will rejoice in His appearing, those who have not enlisted in His kingdom (and they will be in the majority) will mourn (Matt. 24:30; Luke 18:8).

The Thessalonians passage is the only place the Bible speaks of the saints being snatched up or car-

ried away. It is anything but a secret or silent event.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul takes up the subject of the resurrection again, but from a still different angle. "Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51, 52, R.S.V.).

The common feature here is the trumpet sound that raises the dead (hardly a secret or silent approach!). The new feature is the fact that the bodies of both living and dead will be changed—not that they will be no longer recognizable, for Jesus was recognized after His resurrection. But the new bodies will be imperishable. This, Paul says, is the mystery, or something new he had to tell the Corinthians.

Jesus, as well as Paul, Peter, and John, admonished the church to watch, be alert, and be sober, that the day of the Lord not overtake them as a thief in the night (Matt. 24:43; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 3:3). They were not describing the manner of Christ's coming—that would be as visible as the lightning (Matt. 24:27); every eye would see it (Rev. 1:7). But the *timing* would be uncertain. Although Jesus gave signs, and more are found throughout the New Testament, the daily affairs of life and the cares of the world would tend to lull even the elect into stupor (Matt. 24:38, 39; Luke 21:34, 35).

Jesus also said, in reference to His coming, "Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be

grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left" (Matt. 24:40, 41). This is not proof of a secret, silent snatching away of the saints, nor does it say the ones remaining are left *alive.* The text shows how the matter of citizenship in the kingdom of God will cut across friendship ties, family relations, and all other normal social patterns. Jesus was describing what would happen at His appearing in glory.[1] Luke, quoting the same words, prefaces them with the note it would be "when the Son of man is revealed" (Luke 17:30).

There are three words the New Testament uses interchangeably to refer to Christ's return. They are *parousia, epiphaneia,* and *apokalupsis.* The first means "coming," "arrival," or "presence." It is the word used for the ceremonial arrival of a king or other personage. It is at Christ's *parousia,* which is accompanied with a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God, that the dead are raised (1 Thess. 4:15, 16). It is also His *parousia* that destroys the man of sin (2 Thess. 2:8). (Bear in mind for the next chapter that both events occur at the same coming.)

Epiphaneia means "appearance," "that which is seen," so it could hardly refer to an invisible approach. It is at the *epiphaneia* that the Lord rewards His saints with a crown of righteousness (1 Tim. 6:14). Indeed, the "blessed hope" of the saints is the *epiphaneia* of the glory of God (Titus 2:13, 14). Now, the blessed hope we all look forward to is precisely that time when the dead are resurrected and all the righteous are placed beyond the power of sin and death (Rom. 8:18-25). Christ's appearing in glory would be almost anticlimactic

if the resurrection and transport to heaven had already occurred. *Epiphaneia,* we must conclude, refers to the scene when Christ comes in glory and rewards His saints with righteous, immortal life.

The third word, *apokalupsis,* means revelation (1 Cor. 1:7; cf. 1 Peter 4:13). One could hardly apply that to an invisible coming, either.

We have run out of words. None of the three denote a secret coming, or even a two-stage coming. But at this point our rapturist friends, whose literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies have led them to seek a separate coming for the church and for the Jews, specifically ask us not to be too literal in interpreting these three words! [2]

There are two more texts we should consider in this connection. 1 Thessalonians 3:13 speaks of "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints." (A similar expression is in Jude 14.) The assertion is made that Jesus cannot come *with* His saints unless He previously has come *for* His saints and taken them to heaven. But the Greek word for saints simply means "holy ones." God's angels pertain to that category, and thus these verses parallel such texts as Mark 8:38, which describe Christ's coming "in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (See also Deuteronomy 33:2.)

The texts we have been studying are the ones used to support an imminent, any-moment, secret, or unannounced rapture of the church, but they fail in that respect. The New Testament says so much about Christ's visible coming, and nothing about a secret rapture. If it is such an important event for the church to anticipate, why didn't Jesus tell us about it in unmistakable terms?

We must conclude that the real "secret" of the rapture is in this fact: it is based on an improper interpretation of Old Testament prophecies that does not properly consider the New Testament focus. The rapture may be a dramatic idea, but it is not scriptural. In fact, the idea that Jesus would make a secret coming brings to mind the prophetic warning against false claims that He would appear "in the desert," or "in the secret chambers." Jesus said, Don't be taken in by such (Matt. 24:26).

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[1] The rapture view of this text is expressed by Salem Kirban, *666* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 34. E. Schuyler English, in his *Re-Thinking the Rapture* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1954), p. 50, applies the text to Christ's public appearance.

[2] Walvoord, *The Rapture Question,* pp. 155, 156.

THE CHURCH IN TROUBLE

THE QUESTION may be raised by a new student of the rapture theory, From where do proponents of this theory seek support for their position that seven years of tribulation will intervene between the two stages (as rapturists see it) of Christ's second coming? The answer is, in part, from an interpretation of Revelation, particularly chapters eleven to thirteen, but essentially from the prophecy of Daniel 9. Revelation is seen as an enlargement upon Daniel.

Let us look first at the Daniel prophecy. Then we will consider in particular the church's relationship to last-day tribulation.

In Daniel 9 the prophet is praying that God would fulfill His promise, made through Jeremiah, that Israel's exile would be lifted after seventy years. That time has almost expired. Gabriel comes to assure Daniel his prayer has been heard and that Israel will have a probationary period to meet her obligations as God's chosen people.

"Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression,

and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times" (Dan. 9:24, 25).

As the Revised Standard Version has it, these 70 weeks are "weeks of years," or 490 years. The Jews would have seven times as long to demonstrate a change of heart as they had spent in exile. After that, the transgression would be finished, or "the rebellion shall be stopped." [1]

Sixty-nine weeks, or 483 years, would reach to the Messiah. That would leave one week, or seven more years. Daniel 9:27 reads: "And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate."

The usual interpretation of this passage is that Gabriel meant the seventy-week period to begin when the Jews were officially allowed to rebuild Jerusalem. Rapturists (and some others) begin calculation from 445 B.C., as the year Artaxerxes authorized Nehemiah to repair Jerusalem's walls. Using a 360-day, or "prophetic," year (based on Revelation 11:2, 3, and assuming that the Jews of Jesus' time knew of such a method of calculation)

and adding the appropriate number of days for leap years, they arrive at a date in the early A.D. 30's (some say 30, some say 31, many say 32) for the crucifixion. [2]

As for the seventieth week, according to the rapture theory the rejection and crucifixion of Christ broke off the prophecy at this point and shoved the seventieth week ahead some two thousand years. The church era comes in here, it is claimed, as a "parenthesis" or "gap." After the rapture of the church the seventieth week will resume. The Antichrist will make a covenant with the Jews; after three and one-half years (in the "middle of the week") he will turn against them, destroy their temple, and institute the "Great Tribulation," which will last another three and one-half years.

But there are problems with this interpretation. Ezra records three decrees prior to Nehemiah's time. Cyrus made one in about 537 B.C., which gave permission and some funds for the restoration of the Temple. Because local enemies harassed that work, Darius Hystaspes issued another decree in about 519 B.C. Then in 457 Artaxerxes I restored civil status to the Jews, allowing them autonomy. Ezra considers these three decrees as one (Ezra 6:14), for Israel could hardly be considered restored until she had her own government.

Proponents of the other view object that none of these three decrees mention the wall. But the records of Ezra indicate the wall was already under construction even before Darius' decree (chap. 6; see also chap. 9:9). Apparently the work had been begun but was not completed, or may have been partially redestroyed, at the time of Nehemiah's

anxiety. Only fifty-two days were required by Nehemiah to restore the wall, enough time for repair work but hardly enough time to build the entire wall. Moreover, many expositors consider Artaxerxes' authorization to Nehemiah as oral only (Neh. 2:6) and that his letters to the governors could not properly be called a decree.

Accordingly, 457 B.C., when the Jews received civil status, would be the most appropriate date to consider for their restoration. Adding 483 years, we have A.D. 27. This date coincides with the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, when Jesus was baptized (Luke 3). *Messiah* means "anointed." Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit at His baptism (Acts 10:38), and it was shortly after that, that He began preaching, saying, "The time is fulfilled" (Mark 1:15) and "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me" (Luke 4:18).

For three and one-half years Jesus preached the kingdom of God, calling Israel to her appointed destiny. Then the Messiah was "cut off, but not for himself." He died a vicarious death; in the words of Gabriel, He made a "reconciliation for iniquity." His death also terminated all significance to the Temple sacrificial system. It was in recognition of that fact that the Temple veil was rent in two (Matt. 27:51).

After Jesus' crucifixion the Jews had three and one-half more years of grace. Just as the disciples had to have explained to them the significance of Jesus' death in the light of prophecy (Luke 24:24-27), so the Jewish leaders were given a little more time to accept the provisions of the gospel. But when they killed Stephen and began destroying the

church, the severance of national Israel from the body of the true Israel became complete. Paul said of the Jews, "The wrath is come upon them to the uttermost" (1 Thess. 2:16).

This interpretation maintains the integrity of the seventy-week period. Even the destruction of Jerusalem, which is recognized as a part of this prophecy (Matt. 24:15; Luke 21:20) and which occurred under Titus in A.D. 70, had its seeds within this period. That destruction was only a natural working out of a decision made at the time Jesus was crucified, when the Jews claimed no king but Caesar and said of Jesus' death, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matt. 27:25).

We should object to an interpretation that puts gaps into the seventy-week period. There are prophecies that have gaps; many prophecies touch only on the highlighting events within the areas of their concern, but there are no *time* gaps in *time* prophecies! When we are calculating a time period we must count all the time within the period. If we throw in an indefinite time there is no point in calculating time at all. Moreover, Daniel's prophecy would leave us shortchanged were it to lead up to the baptism of Jesus but not include His crucifixion. It was by His death that Jesus provided an end for sin.

We turn now to New Testament references to tribulation and the church. Proponents of the rapture theory do not claim that the church will escape all trials. They recognize that individual Christians often suffer, and that the church as a whole experienced terrible times under both pagan and papal Rome. But the Tribulation is, in the rapture theory,

a particular seven-year period between two "stages" of Christ's coming. The name for this period is taken from Christ's words to His disciples on Mount Olivet.

But that the Tribulation is a seven-year period and comes after Christ has "raptured" His church is based, not on Scripture, but on a series of assumptions. The first and basic assumption is that national Israel will be restored to its pre-Messiah status. The other assumptions follow, that Christ's prophecy of tribulation, as well as the seventieth week of Daniel 9 and most of the book of Revelation, is addressed to that restored Israel. Thus the pattern is cut to fit the cloth.

As has been observed earlier, the instructions of Matthew 24, in being given to the disciples, were given through them to the church. Jesus had already told the Jewish leaders the kingdom of God was being taken from them. Moreover, why should Jesus give signs of His second coming if it were to occur seven years after the rapture—which presumably would be known by all the world immediately after it had happened? And if Jesus' visible coming is just 1260 literal days after the Antichrist has destroyed the Jews' third temple, as rapturists claim, how is it that day will overtake the world as a thief in the night?

Some writers on the rapture claim Luke 21:36 as a promise the church will escape the Tribulation. The text says, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." Says one leading proponent: "The only way one could escape 'all these things' men-

tioned in the context—the events preceding the return of Christ in glory—would be to escape the *period* in which they occurred by being in a different place." [3]

But the context includes "surfeiting and drunkenness" (verse 34). We don't have to be taken out of this world to escape that. A valid Christian experience will do it. Signs in the sun, moon, and stars are mentioned (verse 25). To the extent they are described in this prophecy they should be no great physical problem to the church. Going farther back in the chapter we come to the destruction of Jerusalem. That occurred in A.D. 70.

To say that "all these things" refer to a period just before Christ's coming is a narrow and unwarranted reading of the context. But even if a promise by Jesus that the church will escape a period of extreme tribulation is limited to a period just before He comes, that would not necessarily entail the church's total disappearance from the earth for that period. The Israelites were in Egypt during the ten plagues, but the final seven plagues did not touch them (Ex. 8:22 ff.). Daniel's three friends were unharmed while inside Nebuchadnezzar's furnace.

The Revised Standard Version of Luke 21:36 has, "that you may have strength to escape," implying a struggle, not an evasion. *The New English Bible* says, "Praying at all times for strength to pass safely through all these imminent troubles."

Rapturists draw a contrast between the passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and the first eleven verses of the following chapter. The first is the "day of Christ," they say, while the second is the "day

of the Lord." The expression, "day of the Lord," it is claimed, harks back to the Old Testament "day of Jehovah," a day of judgment rather than a day of comfort. Thus to them the rapture is the "day of Jesus Christ" and the visible coming is the "day of the Lord." [4]

But the basic New Testament affirmation, the confession demanded from all lips, is that Christ is Lord (Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:11). And right here in the 1 Thessalonians 4 passage He is referred to only once as Christ, but four times as Lord. Paul is not contrasting two different days, but is contrasting the attitudes toward the same day of two classes of people —those who are studying the Bible and are waiting for Him, and those who will be unprepared. (Joel calls attention to these same two attitudes toward the same day, in Joel 2:1, 32.)

Paul says, in effect, that we can all be in the first class: "God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9). This harmonizes with Ephesians 1:5 and 2 Peter 3:9. The day of the Lord Jesus Christ will be a day of gladness for the redeemed. Others will mourn and will cry for the rocks of the mountains to hide them from His face (Rev. 6:15-17). We ourselves choose which group we will be in.

Paul's reference in 2 Thessalonians 2 to the "man of sin" is an important passage. He said the day of the Lord "shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition," who would exalt himself to the throne of God. Paul was not putting off into the distant future the coming of Christ, but was simply

establishing a sequence. First apostasy, then the Coming.

This spirit of apostasy, or mystery of iniquity, was already at work, Paul said (verse 7). Only after it was fully revealed would Jesus come. John confirms that the spirit of this "man of sin," or the Antichrist, was already at work (1 John 4:3). It would be a grave error to expect the Antichrist only after the church had been taken from the world, when the church was already being threatened by it in the days of the apostles.

Yet, according to proponents of the rapture theory, the church will be gone. "Falling away," they say (2 Thess. 2:3), means "departure" not in a doctrinal sense, but in a physical, bodily sense. They base this on a "secondary connotation" of the root verb of the noun! [5] Paul in his context makes quite clear he is talking about the apostasy of the "man of sin."

The nature and work of the Antichrist is taken up in some detail in the Revelation, especially in the thirteenth chapter. Rapturists are quite certain this applies to the period of a restored national Israel because, they say, the church is not mentioned in Revelation from the sixth chapter to the nineteenth. [6] But that is a broad assumption to make from such narrow grounds. Israel is not mentioned either, except in chapters 2, 7, and 21!

The fact is, that, as rapturists agree, Revelation is full of symbols and is "highly figurative." [7] The problem is to identify the symbols and to properly unravel the figurative language. Applying our yardstick of Bible interpretation, we must read Revelation as it was written by a Christian, John, who wrote

recognizing the church as the true Israel of God. Therefore, we may find the church in symbol in Revelation, and if reference is made to Israel it would be in the New Testament sense.

In Revelation 12 John describes a noble woman, "clothed with the sun," who gave birth to a man child; the child was caught up to God and the woman fled into the wilderness to escape the devil. Hosea teaches us that God considered Israel as His wife; Jesus was born of the Jewish race; Paul says the Christian church is Christ's bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27). Thus we learn that this woman of Revelation 12 represents God's true people at any given point in history. She is contrasted to the harlot of apostatized Christendom (Rev. 17:1-6).

To make a detailed study of Revelation is beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that this woman of Revelation 12 and particularly the "rest of her offspring" (verse 17, R.S.V.) experience the wrath of the devil in the last days and it is against them that the Antichrist of Revelation 13 directs his enmity.

The spirit of this Antichrist was in the process of development in John's and Paul's days, although it did not fully develop for several hundred more years. A careful comparison of the first beast of Revelation 13 and the prophecy of Daniel 7 identifies a religio-political power that was to arise from the ten parts into which the Roman Empire broke up (that dissolution was complete by the sixth century—no need for another two-thousand-year gap, as some would call for). Thus is the papacy singled out, and we would do well to study this prophecy in the light of present conditions, rather than relegating it to some future time.

In Revelation 13 a second power joins the first in persecuting the saints and in enforcing allegiance to man-made commandments. But in this rising crescendo of tension between the forces of evil and of good, God is also adamant. He can save in His kingdom only those who are loyal to Him. And so lines are drawn for what is to be the final battle in the great controversy that has raged ever since Satan rebelled against God.

In Revelation 14 are the three messages that God sends as a last appeal to the inhabitants of earth. The first warns that the judgment time has arrived. We are to return to the worship of the God who created heaven and earth. Thus this is also a call back to the observance of the fourth commandment, which honors the Creator-God. The second message warns that the confusion of religious teachings that man has devised in contradiction to the Word of God is bankrupt before Heaven.

In the third message, God gives the most stringent warning found within the covers of the Bible against those who acknowledge allegiance to the so-called Christian powers referred to in the thirteenth chapter. In marked contrast to these are the ones who "keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (verse 12). It is immediately after this that John sees the Son of man sitting on a white cloud with a sharp sickle in His hand, and He comes to earth and reaps it. In this reference to the harvest we see once more that both the saints and the sinners are to be on this earth until the moment of Christ's return.

Then John gives us a close-up detail of the last days of conflict between the two opposing sides.

From heaven come seven angels carrying bowls. As each bowl's contents are successively poured out on the earth, great plagues strike the earth's peoples—not the saints, but those who have the "mark of the beast" (chap. 16:2), that sign of allegiance to man-made commandments. Blood to drink, terrible sores, unbearable heat, darkness that is almost palpable.

Notice that these are God's acts. It is unusual indeed for God to unleash punishments, but His mercy has been scorned. He has given enough opportunity for men to repent. This is the beginning of the "wrath . . . poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation" (chap. 14:9-11). The church will be on earth at that time, but of course God's wrath is not directed against them. Instead, they can take comfort in the promise, "He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge. . . . No evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent" (Ps. 91:4-10, R.S.V.).

Spirits of devils go forth to all the world to gather the nations for the great and dreadful battle of Armageddon. It would perhaps be nice to be able to draw maps and show troop movements for this battle, as some have tried to do. But the God of the Bible has not seen fit to give that information. No geographical location has ever borne the name Armageddon, and scholars are divided even as to which Hebrew words John tried to put into Greek. It is most surely a symbolic term, just as Babylon, the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet, mentioned in the same context, are all symbolic terms.

However, there is nothing mysterious about the nature of the battle of Armageddon. It is "the battle of that great day of God Almighty." It is the "day of

the Lord" prophesied by Joel, Obadiah, and even David. It is the climax in the great struggle between God's forces and Satan's. It is a real struggle and it will have cosmic consequences. It is not merely a fight over earthly territory.

As the peoples of earth ready themselves into position for this battle, as the anti-God forces prepare to annihilate the commandment keepers in the name of Christianity, the angel with the seventh bowl empties its contents. A great voice from heaven shouts, "It is done!" and a terrible quake racks the earth. A similar cry and quake marked the death of Jesus on the cross; this time they precede the return of Jesus Christ to earth.

He comes just in time to deliver His beleaguered people. He fights directly against those powers that have been persecuting in the name of religion (Rev. 13:15; 19:19, 20). They call for the rocks and the mountains to hide them from Him whose visage is terrible (chap. 6:15-17).

Although we would be mistaken to believe that the church will escape the tribulation, we need not quiver in fright. Jesus said, "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matt. 5:12). Persecution is not a sure sign we are on God's side, for some people bring persecution on themselves, but we should indeed be concerned if we are so near the ways of the world that the world does not feel threatened by us.

The greatest reason for maintaining equanimity at the thought of persecution is the promise of Jesus that He would be with us. When we are brought before magistrates to give a reason for our faith, He

said, the Holy Spirit will put words into our mouths. Through all trials we are not to fear those who can harm our bodies; instead, we should flee from him who would destroy our souls. We should be ready to give up our life if need be, rather than yield on matters of loyalty to God.

"Lo, I am with you alway," was Jesus' parting promise, "even unto the end of the world" (chap. 28:20). We might add, *especially* at the end of the world.

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[1] *The New English Bible.* © The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press 1970. Reprinted by permission.

[2] Alva J. McClain, *Daniel's Prophecy of the 70 Weeks* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), pp. 22-25.

[3] Walvoord, *The Rapture Question,* p. 142.

[4] James Montgomery Boice, *The Last and Future World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), pp. 36-40.

[5] English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture,* p. 68.

[6] Lindsey, *op. cit.,* pp. 143, 144.

[7] Ironside, *op. cit.,* p. 32.

TIME NO MORE

COMING AS He does just when His people are about to be destroyed in one fell swoop (Dan. 12:1), the appearance of Christ in the sky will be a great and dramatic event. Those who are poised to pounce on the faithful are filled with consternation—many of them have been so blinded as to think they were on God's side, but now it is evident they have been fighting Him (Matt. 7:22, 23). Adding to the confusion, the earth erupts in violent convulsions—great earthquakes, islands disappearing, mountains moved, rivers thrown off course, cities bursting into flame, great tidal waves sweeping coastal areas, even a hailstorm in which the stones weigh some sixty pounds apiece (Rev. 16:17-21).

Accompanying Jesus are all the angels of heaven (Matt. 25:31). John in Revelation calls them the "armies of heaven," and Paul and Jude refer to them as "saints," or holy ones. With them will be the few mortals already taken to heaven, such as Enoch, Elijah, and Moses.

How do we know these are not earth's saints who come with Jesus? Because Paul, in 1 Thessa-

lonians 4, tells us where they are. This chapter describes in detail what happens when Jesus returns, so we turn again to it now.

From verse 15 onward we read: "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep [are asleep, as in verse 13]. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (R.S.V.).

Paul assures us that the dead will not be forgotten. In the resurrection they are raised from their graves before the living are caught up to meet the Lord. What a scene that will be! The angels accompany Jesus from heaven—all the angels, we are told, so many that from a distance it seems Jesus is riding on a cloud. As the entourage nears the earth groups of angels break away and fly to all parts of the earth to call from their graves those who have died in the faith of Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, "He shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds" (Matt. 24:31).

At this point all the redeemed of all ages, those who have died and those still living at the time of Jesus' return, are together for the first time. From Abel, the first saint to die, to the youngest saint yet alive, they are all there, Christ's blood-purchased treasure, and they are caught up to meet the Lord in the air.

It is at this time, when the righteous dead are raised to new life and immortality, that the righteous living are also given immortality. (At least one prominent rapturist maintains that the saints do not receive immortality until one thousand years after Christ's coming in glory.*) Paul puts the two events in the same moment, "at the last trump" (1 Cor. 15:52-54). In Philippians 3:20, 21, Paul further describes this change of body that the saints will experience. Our "vile" bodies will be "fashioned like unto his glorious body." John affirms that "when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

And what about the wicked, those who to the end refuse to give first allegiance to Jesus? They are all slain. Some are killed by the earthquakes and other upheavals that are attendant upon Christ's coming (Rev. 6:15, 16); others are slain by the very brilliance of His glory (2 Thess. 2:8). That *all* the wicked are slain at this time was borne out by Jesus in such texts as Luke 17:27-30. Jesus comes as conquering king, in all the glory of heaven, and sinful souls simply cannot abide that manifestation (Rev. 19:20, 21).

This, then, is the way Jesus divides the nations of the earth, "as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats." In essence they divide themselves. By the choices they themselves have made, they determine whether they live or die at the return of Christ.

Jesus does not stay on earth at this time. He returns to heaven with His precious people. On at least two occasions He told His disciples He would do this (John 14:3; 13:36). John in vision saw

the redeemed in heaven. He says, "I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands" (Rev. 7:9). They are not disembodied spirits, for they are clothed and have hands. The scene must be in heaven, for also present are the elders and the four living creatures. The total background is the same as that in Revelation 4 and 5. And the multitude could not have gotten to heaven before Christ's coming, because it is only at His coming that He raises the righteous who have died.

We may notice that during the thousand years the righteous reign *with Christ* (chap. 20:6), or in heaven. It is only after the thousand years that God is *with them* (chap. 21:3), or on earth.

But why does Jesus take them to heaven? Why does He not set up His throne on earth immediately and rule the righteous here? Again we see the extent to which God will go to vindicate His name. Satan has said He is unjust, that He is a harsh master, ready to destroy anyone out of hand. God takes the saints to heaven so that they can verify His judgments. Oh, yes, the saints will have a share in the judgment. As Paul says, "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?" (1 Cor. 6:2, 3).

How is this? one may ask. Will not the judgment be complete before Christ comes? Else, how would

He know whom to take from their graves and carry to heaven? Yes, God will have determined who are righteous. But some of those raised from their graves, or some of the saints still living, may look around and notice that a loved one is not saved. Some may reason: Surely that loved one was a Christian? Did God make a mistake in not saving that person? So God will allow the saints to go over the record books in heaven—to satisfy themselves that He is just. There they may be able to see, according to the records that do not lie, that that loved one of theirs, although a professed Christian, did not really surrender his or her heart to the Lord.

In this way God will assure that never, never, throughout eternity, will anyone have grounds to say that God deviated from the love that has constituted the basis of His kingdom. Never again will the seeds of doubt, or rebellion, or sin, find any root.

But what about the unrepentant? When we last considered them they were all slain by Jesus' coming. Is that the last to be seen of them? We might expect so, under the normal course of events, but the Bible does not leave us in doubt. After describing the saints judging with Christ for a thousand years, John says, "But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. . . . And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison. And shall go out to deceive the nations" (Rev. 20:5-7).

Satan was bound at the beginning of the thousand years, or at the time of Christ's coming. At that time the wicked were all slain and all the saints were transported to heaven. Satan could not leave this

desolated, empty earth, or "bottomless pit" as it is called. (See Jeremiah 4:23-27 for a word picture of the earth with no one on it.) At the end of the thousand years Satan is "released" by the resurrection of the wicked. Jesus called this the "resurrection of damnation" (John 5:29).

Immediately upon their resurrection Satan marshalls the wicked under his banner once again. There is no deterrent to his control over them now. The Holy Spirit, who had long pleaded with them, no longer moves upon them. They have had their chance, they have made their choice. Satan organizes them to march against the New Jerusalem, which has come down from heaven to this earth (Rev. 21:1).

In this act of preparation for war against God's city, the wicked make one last demonstration of their intransigence. They are but confirming the conclusion reached by the saints during their study of the records—these wicked are deserving of eternal death.

As the wicked are raised and attack the Holy City, God halts them and calls them all to account for "the things done in his [each one's] body" (2 Cor. 5:10). All the wicked, including Satan himself, are forced before all the universe to admit God's justice and supremacy. It is at this time that the words of Paul are fulfilled: "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10, 11; see also Isa. 45:23, 24).

Thus is the great controversy concluded. The fire that then destroys the wicked will "burn them

up," and "leave them neither root nor branch" (Mal. 4:1). This is the "second death" (Rev. 20:14). The same fire will purify the entire earth, according to Peter's prophecy, and from the ashes God will create "a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter 3:10-13).

With every unrepentant sinner destroyed in this second death, and with Satan and all the angels that joined him in rebellion also destroyed, the last vestige of sin will be eradicated. Of Satan's end we read, "All they that know thee among the people shall be astonished at thee: thou shalt be a terror, and never shalt thou be any more" (Eze. 28:19).

"And God shall wipe away all tears" from the eyes of the redeemed ones. "And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (Rev. 21:4). God has vindicated His rule, He has demonstrated the supremacy of His love, He has proved the fairness of His law. Now He can establish His throne on this earth, in the New Jerusalem. And so this planet, the one that has cost God so great a price, will become a center of His universe. And throughout eternity the redeemed ones will find their greatest joy in studying deeper into the love of God.

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* Lindsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 177, 178.

THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

MORE IMPORTANT than the manner of Jesus' second coming, or even than the timing of that event, is its relationship to our salvation from sin. Does Jesus' coming itself determine our salvation, or are we saved before He comes, or perhaps after? When is our eternal destiny determined?

According to the doctrine of the rapture, a number constituting the church will be saved at Jesus' secret coming; the rest of the world will go through seven years of terrible tribulation, and those who survive will have another chance at salvation before He comes again.[1] Initially, these conversions will be from among the Jews, ranging from 144,000 to a third of all the Jews.[2] The converted Jews go forth and convert a numberless multitude from all nations, ready for Jesus' triumphal appearance.[3]

(It is interesting to note that in keeping with their dispensationalist perspective many rapturists teach that the Holy Spirit will return to a reduced, pre-Pentecostal, role at the time of the rapture.[4] Then how, we might ask, with the church allegedly "raptured" and in heaven, can a work of conversion

be done for the Jews such as has not been achieved for the past two thousand years? A prominent rapturist says this will be accomplished by God revealing "Himself in a special way" to the Jews.[5] But this is intimating that God is partial. If God has a special way of saving people, or of getting their attention, a way that is more effective than any He has used to date, could He not be accused of injustice? Is God doing less than His best for our salvation?)

It was to answer a second-chance proposal similar to the one we have before us, that Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In conclusion He said of the Jewish leaders, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16: 31). In making a personal application of this statement, we understand that we have the Bible and all the testimony of the prophets to persuade us to accept salvation in Him. If this is not enough, then someone rising from the dead, or even Jesus in person, would not be enough to persuade us to make that decision. In short, God has done all He can do.

Mankind had its first chance at eternal life in the Garden of Eden. We failed that one. Then God sent His Son to give us another chance. Through Jesus, God demonstrates His love; He has given us the Word to teach us His will; He has shown again and again what happens to those who despise His kingdom. For thousands of years He has dealt with patience and longsuffering. His Spirit pleads incessantly with sinners. Instead of "a second chance," He gives us hundreds, thousands, of chances. Nothing further is to be gained by delaying judg-

ment until after Jesus comes.

Other parables of Jesus teach the same lesson, that the irrevocable classification into two groups—the repentant and the unrepentant, the saints and the wicked, the saved and the lost—will be settled by the time Jesus comes.

In the parable of the harvest, the wheat and the tares grow together only until the end of the world; then the tares are bundled together and burned (Matt. 13:24-30). This harvest takes place at the time of Jesus' coming, for we read in Revelation that as the Son of man comes from heaven He holds in His hand a sharp sickle, "and he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth; and the earth was reaped" (Rev. 14:16).

In the parable of the ten virgins, only those virgins who had prepared themselves with oil ahead of time were able to go into the wedding feast. When the bridegroom came, those who lacked oil in their lamps were left outside.

Jesus said He would separate the nations as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. This separation is accomplished by the very glory of His appearing. Only those who are righteous in His salvation will be able to stand the sight. "Then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming" (2 Thess. 2:8). The wicked will actually ask to be destroyed, for they then know that they have lost their last chance. Revelation 6:16 describes them calling for the mountains and rocks to fall on them, to hide them from the face of the coming Lord.

This implies that Christ will know before He

returns who will be the ones that will make up His kingdom. And of course, that is just the case. That is what He is doing now in His high priestly work in heaven—He is determining the destiny of men and women. When that work is completed He pronounces the decree, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still" (Rev. 22:11).

After that decree goes forth, then Jesus returns to earth, for the next verse continues, "And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be."

That is why the author of Hebrews emphasizes the importance of making our decision now to accept Jesus as our Lord and Master. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:12, 13).

Paul made a similar appeal to the church at Corinth: "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). Death itself may close our probation at any time, even before Christ gives His final decree. "For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth" (Isa. 38:18).

In his first Epistle, John makes a statement relevant to this topic of when our preparation is to be completed. "We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:2, 3). Hope in the Second Coming, John says, is an instrument to help us get ready for that coming. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, then, with our cooperation, we are made to be like Jesus, and we will be like Him *when He appears.*

If we knew that we did not have to be ready by the time He appears, that we would have seven years after that to make the necessary preparation, would we make it now? Probably not. Human nature is not that way. We like to put things off, if we can. But there is no such thing as taking our chances with the Tribulation. There is no hope for the one who puts off his decision. Jesus tells us, You *must* be getting ready *now.*

At this point let us recapitulate the points made in this study of the rapture question. The teaching of the secret rapture is not based on a clear "Thus saith the Lord," but is rather a deduction drawn from a prior position—that the church will not be on earth during the tribulation of which Christ spoke. And that position, in turn, is arrived at from an ultraliteral interpretation of Scripture, one that denies man's free will and denies God the ability to work around man's choices.

We have found that such a position is unwarranted. Because Israel rejected a kingdom relationship in Christ, God withdrew their national privileges in favor of the new and true Israel. Old Testament prophecies must be interpreted on the basis that the church now constitutes God's Israel. The real "secret" of the rapture theory, we conclude, is that it is not Biblical.

Moreover, the doctrine of the rapture can be dangerous for at least two reasons. By assigning the Antichrist to some future date, his present work is disguised and we are put off guard. Second, by teaching a second chance at salvation, the rapture doctrine offers a hope that is unfounded.

To hold that the church will be on earth during the time of final tribulation does not put off the second coming of Christ far into the future. As Alvin Toffler has demonstrated in his book *Future Shock,* [6] we are already experiencing a rapid acceleration of traumatic events. John the revelator says the devil is come down unto us "in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Rev. 12: 12, R.S.V.). Most of the signs of Jesus' return foretold by Jesus and John have been fulfilled. The chief ones remaining are those that transpire in the minds of men. The windup of history need not take long if God's people would fulfill their responsibilities (2 Peter 3:12, R.S.V.).

We must make our preparation now. The decisions we make tomorrow are determined to a great degree by the decisions we make today. We must make our peace with God now. When we see Jesus coming with His angels it will be too late; our destiny will already have been decided. If we wait until then we will find ourselves among those calling for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them. That group will include many so-called Christians. They will have thought they were on the right side. "Lord, Lord," they will cry, "have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" But the Lord will reply, "I never knew

you [because you never really knew Me]: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:22, 23).

If Jesus seems to be delaying His coming we can find the reason here. He is not waiting for some sign to be fulfilled. He has control of the signs. He is certainly not waiting for the earth to become "wicked enough." Heaven forbid! Every day that evil continues only adds to His hurt. Jesus is waiting for His people to want heaven enough to demonstrate that His way of life is possible, that His followers are the most trustworthy people in all the world. *He is waiting for this harvest of the gospel seed to ripen!* (Compare Mark 4:26-29 with Revelation 14:14-16.)

From the beginning, God has maintained that His kingdom is the only good and right kind. Jesus lived on earth to demonstrate God's love and His will. He has opened the way for each one of us to become a son or a daughter of God. These are the ones who will make up His kingdom. All that remains now is for His people to lay their earthly toys aside, to want heaven enough to yield everything to God and allow Him to reign supreme in their lives.

Will you enter the lists on God's side? Will you allow Him to demonstrate in your life the power of His love? Will you join the kingdom of God?

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[1] Ryrie, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
[2] Lindsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 111, 167.
[3] English, *op. cit.*, pp. 101, 102.
[4] Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 88.
[5] Lindsey, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
[6] Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

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